News Release
Communiqué

Ontario

Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care

Ministère de la Santé et des Soins de longue durée

For Immediate Release
August 23, 2007
2007/nr-173

MCGUINTY GOVERNMENT PUTS SAFETY FIRST FOR NURSES AND OTHER HEALTH CARE WORKERS

New Equipment Will Help Protect Workers From Deadly Diseases

TORONTO- The McGuinty government is protecting Ontario's nurses from potentially life-threatening diseases like SARS and Avian Flu by purchasing 55 million N95 respirators and mandating the use of safety engineered needles or needle-less systems in Ontario hospitals, Health and Long-Term Care Minister George Smitherman announced today.

"By investing in better equipment, we are putting the lessons we learned from SARS into action," said Smitherman. "These new respirators will help provide the protection that nurses and other front line health care providers deserve because their health and safety must be paramount when dealing with infectious diseases."

"Safe workplaces are a priority for this government," said Minister of Labour Steve Peters. "Making safety engineered needles or needle-less systems mandatory will help us reach our goal by creating safer work environments that prevent health related injuries."

"The Ontario Safety Association for Community and Healthcare (OSACH) applauds Ministers' Smitherman and Peters for their collaborative leadership to protect our caregivers by advancing safety first," said President and Chief Executive Officer of the Ontario Safety Association for Community and Healthcare Joseline Sikorski. "Providing our caregivers with safe equipment and work environments are essential priorities in linking a culture of safety with quality care"

The government will purchase up to 55 million N95 respirators as part of its 2007 Ontario Health Plan for an Influenza Pandemic. N95 respirators are designed to provide a higher level of respiratory protection for the wearer when compared to surgical masks.

A new regulation under the Occupational Health and Safety Act will make safety engineered needles or needle-less systems mandatory in all hospitals as of September 1, 2008. The government intends to mandate the use of safety engineered needles or needle-less systems in long-term care homes, psychiatric facilities, laboratories and specimen collection centres in 2009 and in other health care workplaces (home care, doctor's offices, ambulances, etc.) in 2010.

In his final report on SARS, Justice Campbell focused on the need to protect the safety of the province's front line health care workers. As a result, the province has adopted the "precautionary principle" in providing personal protective equipment when faced with infectious disease outbreaks – this means safety first and foremost for Ontario's health care workers. The province has also appointed a new, permanent health and safety advisory committee under the Occupational Health and Safety Act to provide practical advice and recommendations to ensure health care workers are protected.

This is just one more example of how, working together, Ontarians have achieved results in making Ontario an employer of choice. Other initiatives include:

- Purchased more than 19,000 bed lifts to literally save nurses' backs
- Launching the pains and strains campaign to help reduce ergonomic-related injuries, which account for 42 per cent of all lost-time injuries in Ontario
- Hiring 200 new health and safety inspectors to help achieve the government's goal of preventing 20,000 workplace injuries by 2008.

Today's initiative is part of the McGuinty government's plan for innovation in public health care, building a system that delivers on three priorities – keeping Ontarians healthy, reducing wait times and providing better access to doctors and nurses.

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